

August 5, 2024

To Honorable Judge Hala Y. Jarbou,

Chief Judge, Western District Court, Michigan Southern Division

I am David Winfree, the father of ArisKnight Winfree. I am acquainted with the facts of ArisKnight's case. I am providing the following information believing it to be relevant to his sentencing. I have many fond memories of our family vacations with ArisKnight at Lake Michigan beach, jumping from the lighthouse pier into the water, climbing the high sand dunes, running down them together at breakneck speed, and building castles in the sand. He and I explored the woods and stream behind our house, near Ann Arbor. I remember taking him to his soccer games and practices and how much we enjoyed the father/son soccer games.

I read to him hundreds of times throughout his childhood, before he went to sleep. He especially loved the Narnia Chronicles, by C. S. Lewis. These were thrilling fantasy adventure stories, packed with inspirational spiritual truths. I would read several chapters a night, until he became sleepy. Then I would tuck him in, give him a kiss and a big hug and whisper in his ear that I loved him.

Our family went to the First Congregational Church in Ann Arbor Michigan. It had an amazing music program, with outstanding students and faculty from the University of Michigan Music School. All of my children joined the church's children's choir. I was so happy they could participate in such an enriching experience of singing about love, peace, kindness, unity and joy. The choir director calmed them down with breath work and yoga before each practice and provided extracurricular enriching social activities for children who participated. The children did special performances for the congregation, sometimes sang with the adult choir, performed with other children's choirs and local professional children's musicians, and on one occasion performed at a Ford Honors Program in U of M Rackham Hall. He was in the church choir from about five years old until he started middle school and began singing in his middle school choir.

I often talked to ArisKnight about spiritual topics and the importance of being a good person, treating others well, and helping to make the world a better place. He made multiple trips to China assisting his grandfather with a Buddhist philanthropic organization. At about age 14, I introduced him to inspirational spiritual self help books by Wayne Dyer and Deepak Chopra and also gave him spiritual fantasy adventure books that focused on instilling spiritual values. He read them avidly. I also taught him about investing and set up a small investment account, so he could learn to buy and sell. We had conversations that if he ever became wealthy in business he would do good in the world by giving a considerable amount of any money he made to philanthropic causes.

Then something shifted. At about age 16, he started to focus on his high school friends and did not want to go to church or family outings. In the last two years of high school, he increasingly distanced himself from family. I thought it was a normal stage of teenage life. Throughout his first two years at college and moving forward as an adult into his twenties he became extremely distant toward family members. There were times when he refused to communicate with me for months or even for years at a time. Intermittently, he would open up to me and share something of what he was doing, but much of what I knew of him came from other family members. He was tightly focused on his projects. Multiple times he would quit his college schooling in mid-semester to focus on business projects. He would work day and night, confident that each new project would

be highly successful, and when it did not succeed he would crash into a period of depression, only to rise again and pour himself into the next one.

As a child and especially from age eighteen onward, there were times where he appeared to think very fast and catch on to technical things much faster than the average person. He would talk so fast that we would not understand what he was saying. When asked to repeat or slow down, he did not seem to be able to slow down. He would repeat it again, just as fast, and would become very impatient and irritated, either walking away or saying we were too slow to understand.

Increasingly, his communications, emotional reactions, and behavior appeared out of proportion, distorted, and outside of the expected norm. He seemed to be in his own world and to have lost his capacity of empathy towards others and the capacity to understand their perspectives. When confronted by family members about his abrupt, unreasonable, impatient behavior and terse or rapid communications he would become agitated, raise his voice to show his irritation, or perhaps almost break into tears, and then quickly isolate himself by turning away, and going to his room. Even a simple polite request, such as to please move the car over a few feet to make more room for others, might be interpreted by him as being a severe reprimand, causing his voice to begin to quaver like a little child. Based on what we understand now, this was probably about the point in time that he was becoming increasingly bipolar and spending more time in manic or depressed states.

Regardless of the bipolar manic highs and depressive lows, he was still very smart and managed to get some interesting international jobs. He had some success helping to set up software programming competitions attended by top computer science students and recruiters for information technology companies on university campuses in the United States and in Asia. He also got a job with a Chinese company, working in China and Washington D.C. But the cycles of manic and depressive states took a toll on his long term ability to stay employed. His disassociated and agitated states and tunnel focus during his manic states consistently prevented him from accurately assessing the potential risk in his undertakings.

Even in 2018, as his bipolar cycles were taking a toll, there were aspects of his character that were commendable. He was always a gift giver, purchasing and giving gifts to those he loved, when he had funds to do so. Except when highly depressed, he continued to visit with and assist his maternal grandfather and visit his paternal grandmother well into her 90s,

In 2019 he reached out to me for spiritual and business advice. He was about to make a business trip to China and wanted to receive frequent guidance. He was visualizing making a large amount of money and was still speaking of giving a large amount of what he made to charity. At this time that I finally realized that he was bipolar, had probably been so for several years, and was currently in the midst of a manic state. He had an extraordinary business opportunity, but I realized he was not talking to people who had sufficient clout and money. He was borrowing and swiftly losing a large amount of money from his mother who was trying to help him succeed. I tried to focus him on connecting with appropriate investment partners, but he was spending at an unsustainable rate and he finally realized he could not succeed. He appeared to be terrified and told me that he felt himself to be a total failure. He came back to the United States and went into a major depression, isolating himself almost 24/7, leaving his room for very short periods to eat, usually in the middle of the night, for about a year.


In addition to his business failure in China, earlier in 2019, he lost one of his best friends, due to his manic behavior. He was also deeply distressed by the loss of a romantic relationship earlier in 2019. By approximately August of 2019 he was wrestling with the shame of losing his mother's money and wondering how he would ever be able to pay her back. He shared with me that he was feeling deep fear and hopelessness. By the end of 2019, he completely stopped communicating with me. I suspect that being sequestered in his room in a deeply depressed state for many months played a major part in the development of his addiction to pornography, probably being the only thing that gave him a temporary sense of escape in the midst of that long period of depression.

I wish we had recognized his bipolar struggles much earlier, when he was still a minor, and helped him obtain psychiatric care. At about age 19, he once approached me with a concern that he felt himself to be very different from most other people. I could not get any more details than that from him. I offered to help him seek therapy at that time, but he did not accept and soon distanced himself from me again. Over the last several years, his immediate family members have all considered him to be insanely out of balance, and potentially harmful to himself or others. Although he was urged to obtain help during this period of time, he never did.

I can only conclude that his being in a highly disassociated, manic, tunnel-focused state of mind significantly contributed to him taking the actions for which he is being sentenced. What he did was not rational and brought great harm to others and total devastation to him. If he had been diagnosed and placed on proper medication several years ago and received therapy, I consider it likely that he would not have engaged in the harmful actions for which he is currently imprisoned for. It was only while incarcerated during early 2023 that he was diagnosed as being bipolar and prescribed 500 mg of Depakote twice daily to stabilize him.

I hope his sentencing will take into account his mental illness, that there will be some way that he can get medical treatment and therapy for his illness. As he takes his medications and his mental condition improves, I hope there will be potential for him to be released and eventually recover the positive and beautiful parts of himself and make constructive contributions to society.

Sincerely,

  
David Winfree